

CONCLUSIONS



Turning geopolitical challenges into a European Union success story: the contribution of organised civil society

ANNUAL MEETING of the Presidents and Secretaries-General
of the EESC and of the national ESCs of the EU

9-10 November 2022 | Bucharest



European Economic
and Social Committee





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the contribution of organised civil society**

CONCLUSIONS

Organised civil society at the forefront of addressing the integration needs of people fleeing the war in Ukraine: good practices, challenges and perspectives

The Russian unprovoked and illegal military aggression on Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022 caused a massive influx of refugees across Europe. According to the UN Refugee Agency, at the beginning of November 2022, more than 7.8 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded in Europe¹. The EESC and the national ESCs commend the EU for its swift reaction to mitigate the **humanitarian consequences** of the war. Europe showed **solidarity** with Ukraine and activated its EU-wide **temporary protection system**, granting a range of **rights** and **guarantees** to **displaced persons** from non-EU countries in need of immediate protection.

The EESC and national ESCs also highlight the **prompt reaction of civil society organisations**. They have been crucial in providing the necessary response to address the humanitarian, social and economic consequences of the war on refugees across Europe, and in particular in the countries most affected by the influx, such as Poland, Romania, Hungary and Germany, to name a few.

Thanks to a flexible approach and close cooperation with local and regional authorities and citizens, the EESC and national ESCs' members' organisations provided humanitarian, logistical and medical assistance for the people fleeing the war; they contributed, for instance, to addressing the housing shortage for refugees, organising accommodation for displaced families.

As the war continues, however, the EESC and the national ESCs call on all governments to do everything in their power to ensure that the Ukrainian people in the war zones have access to essential items, in particular clean water, food, medicine and electricity. At the same time, they warn against the risk of "solidarity fatigue" among volunteers and society at large, especially in the context of worsening economic hardship for EU citizens. We reaffirm our commitment to support Ukraine and to help the Member States mitigate the impact of refugee flows.

It is important **to facilitate EU labour market access for Ukrainian refugees**, and in particular the women, who represent the vast majority of them. This will also benefit the EU's economic recovery, given the important skills and labour shortages that hamper growth in many sectors in the EU. Therefore, **recognition of Ukrainian refugees' qualifications, language training, the development of an appropriate professional training offer and childcare availability** play an important role. It is equally important to recognise the specific situation of these women and children in conflict zones and upon arrival in host countries, including the risks of **exploitation** and **gender-based violence**, in particular sexual violence and human trafficking.

Last but not least, it will be necessary to address the **financial burden** of those Member States most affected by the influx of refugees, including at regional and local level, and to support financially the civil society organisations concerned, that should also be genuinely involved in the programming and monitoring of EU and national humanitarian assistance.

Finally, we strongly support the idea that lessons learnt from the conflict in Ukraine should be integrated into European migration and asylum policy.

¹ [Ukraine Refugee Situation \(unhcr.org\)](https://www.unhcr.org/)

The EESC and national ESCs as important partners for the follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe

The EESC and the national ESCs have long advocated for **stronger participatory democracy** in EU decision making in order to better connect with EU citizens and to **involve civil society in the EU legislative process**. We are pleased that the organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe has resulted in an innovative bottom-up exercise where citizens across the EU could express their views.

The 325 measures to achieve 49 objectives, brought together in a final report adopted on May 2022, are substantial and far-reaching. The EESC and national ESCs have been a backbone of this consultation, supported the roll-out of 75 events, 60% of which gathered more than 7 600 participants, and contributed to the final recommendations.

We note in particular that the final report explicitly mentions the importance of **organised civil society in the architecture of European democracy**, and goes on to suggest that the EU should better involve social partners and organised civil society, while calling for "enhancing the institutional role of the EESC and empowering it as facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities".

In the State of the Union speech on 14 September, President von der Leyen acknowledged the importance of **Citizens' panels** and the need to make them a regular feature of democratic life.

We firmly believe that a **tangible and transparent follow-up** is crucial and that the EESC and national ESCs must be a key part of it. We should secure the strongest possible involvement of our network in future citizens' panels, which should be structured, made permanent and institutionalised.

The EESC and the national ESCs look forward to fully participating in the follow-up of the Conference, bringing added value. We will continue our work in bringing the voice of organised civil society to the European level.

The strengthening of EU open strategic autonomy viewed from the EESC, national ESCs and organised civil society: the energy and food sectors

Further to the military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the geopolitical situation has aggravated the **energy crisis** in Europe and worldwide. The consequences of the war on EU energy supply and prices have strengthened the need to enhance and promote the EU's **open strategic autonomy in the field of energy**.

Achieving this objective primarily means reinforcing EU sovereignty, minimising EU dependence on unreliable suppliers or on States that do not share EU values, and ensuring security of supply at a cost "as affordable as possible" for consumers and businesses.

This implies first cooperating with countries able to supply Europe with energy in the short term without creating new dependencies in the long term, and in a second step, restructuring and developing an EU energy system to be more sustainable, in line with the green transition embedded in the European Green Deal and in the "Fit for 55" package.

The EESC and national ESCs reiterate that achieving strategic autonomy goes hand in hand with respecting the **climate goals** set at EU level. An energy supply based on EU renewables or low-carbon energy would contribute significantly to our **energy security**. Therefore, the EU's potential in the field of home-grown renewables should be deployed as widely as possible. In this context, we underline that massive investment in smart and renewable energy systems, as well as storage infrastructure, is extremely important.

The spike in energy prices has triggered rampant inflation in the energy sector and the broader economy, and an increasing number of citizens are being affected by energy poverty across the EU. Therefore, it is important that investments in energy efficiency, renewables and comprehensive building renovations support the lowest-income groups. Ensuring that **households** have the financial means to invest in order **to produce energy for themselves** (prosumers) will allow them to contribute to strategic autonomy individually or as part of **energy communities**.

Finally, we believe that the social dimension must be taken into account in any measures planned as part of the **energy transition** in order not to jeopardise public approval for the necessary changes and to ensure a just transition and to enable positive developments in the economy, including new jobs, which will promote social acceptance and ownership of the energy transition by citizens and businesses to achieve strategic autonomy. With respect to businesses, it is vital that the energy transition is managed in such a way that there is always **security of supply at affordable prices**, otherwise we run the risk of losing key industries which will either close down permanently or move to competing continents. Civil society organisations have a clear role to play in supporting citizens, especially the most vulnerable, consumers and businesses to achieve a just energy transition. They can offer emergency support targeted at those in the most critical situation, including **SMEs** or **energy-intensive industries**. They are involved in large information campaigns to support energy savings and reduction of gas consumption.

Concerning the **food sector**, according to a recent European Parliament publication, food availability is not a current issue in the EU but, due to soaring prices in agricultural products and inputs for food production, **affordability of food products is a growing problem**, especially for low-income households. Even before the war in Ukraine, the EESC and the national ESCs proposed to **reinforce EU strategic autonomy applied to food systems**.

We reiterate our definition of this concept, based on food production, workforce and fair trade, aiming to ensure food security and sustainability for all EU citizens through a fair, healthy, sustainable and resilient food supply. In order to achieve this, we propose a range of measures.

To avoid dependence on monopoly suppliers for certain agricultural goods or inputs, we reiterate our call for a **security review of EU food**. We propose to reduce our dependency on agricultural inputs. The EESC and the national ESCs advocate for more **diversified EU food systems**, including organic farming, farm shops, urban farming and support the "local for local" approach.

To build stronger EU food resilience, we call for **short supply chains** and **intelligent food stock management**. To ensure the structured involvement of civil society and stakeholders across the food supply chain, we recall our recommendation to explore the option of a **European Food Council**, which could help evaluate the risks in the food supply chain.

The geopolitical challenges the EU is currently facing present both an **opportunity** to strengthen the EU's assertiveness on the world stage and to reinforce its economic and social cohesion. The EESC and the national ESCs highlight that to meet these challenges, the voice of European organised civil society is crucial. Therefore, it is particularly important that the national ESCs be involved in a genuine way in the policy-making process, and that they be allowed adequate time to deliver their views on legislative proposals. To overcome the current crises, the European Union must count on social dialogue at every level as well as on civil dialogue.
